THE ARISTOCRACY OF ART

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THE ARISTOCRACY OF ART: Merle Armitage

AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE CALIFORNIA ART CLUB OPEN FORUM, LOS ANGELES MARCH 4, 1929

JAKE ZEITLIN: LOS ANGELES, MCMXXIX

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OUR SENSITIVE reactions to the world are the result of two things, the perceptions with which we were born, and the experiences which we have. The degree to which we may add to natural sensitiveness and perspicacity, is in direct ratio to the flexibility and plasticity of our spirit and our mentality. Some people congeal, spiritually and mentally, when they are fifteen years of age, some when they are fifty, others never. Because the average age limit of becoming concrete and impervious to the overtones of the world is so low, we have the ever present problem of the introduction of new ideas, new aesthetic possibilities, new thoughts. Most minds do not function as thinking machines but as

cataloging machines. A syllogism is a thing to be avoided, it is so much easier to believe what we read, and let some other person struggle through the intellectual labyrinth.

This is by way of introduction to my premise that art is essentially aristocratic. One may have several kinds of emotions when confronted by a work of art, but one can gain nothing whatever from that contact unless *some* reaction takes place. Assuming that it is really a work of art which we have in mind, the degree of our reaction, whether emotional, intellectual, physical, sensual or simply pleasurable, is the exact degree of our natural sensitiveness, plus our aesthetic growth and experiences. Let us define aristocratic. Webster says:

> *ARISTOCRAT: A member of an aristocracy. A person with the tastes, spirit, assumptions or traditions of the aristocracy. One who is exclusive and proud of lineage. A class of persons preeminent by reason of birth, wealth or culture. The chief persons of a country or place. Government, as of a state, by its best citizens.*

Picking out of this definition those things which can properly apply to an abstract and inanimate thing, we find the words *taste, spirit, tradition, culture, best.* Let me add my own definition of what I mean by the aristocracy of art.

This aristocracy has nothing to do with the commonly accepted notion of aristocracy, of fat and dull dowagers rolling about to teas in padded limousines, of simply possessing wealth or power. The aristocracy, the world which I wish to visualize, is an aristocracy of the mind and the spirit, and particularly the spirit. Let us see what Webster says about the word *common*, the exact opposite of aristocrat.

COMMON: *Not distinguished or separate from the ordinary. Not excellent or distinguished, in tone or quality. Commonplace, hackneyed, coarse, vulgar, low.*

Are these things not the very antithesis of all we know as art? Are these not the things which art is not, and never can be?

Let us be careful that a mere snobbishness does not enter here. It is not my intention to present art as a thing which appeals only to the so called better classes. I am not dividing my classes according to either learning or wealth. I am making a spiritual division. What makes a man common? The lack of uncommon qualities. To be satisfied with the sordid, the cheap, the mean, to have no interest in other than commonplace and insipid companions, to have no sympathy with nor curiosity about anything above the common level, to be interested only in the trivial and superficial things, to

be insensitive to fine things, things which have come to be written and thought of as great, to have little respect for truth, to be petty, to be mean; these are some of the attributes of the common man. And whether he has a seat on the stock exchange, whether he is a governor, whether he digs in the ditch or is a farm hand, if he has those attributes, he is, I maintain, a common man.

But if he is sensitive to beauty, if he is sympathetic to man's more inspired utterances, if he receive from a work of art a naturally fine reaction of some sort, and of some degree; if he has a curiosity about delving further into aesthetic matters, and if he is making some sort of sacrifice to do so, in other words if his attitude is sincere and not a pose; then that man can be either a farm hand, a ditch digger, a banker or a king, and he is, in my estimation, not a common man.

These digressions and approaches are all again to bring to bear my idea that Art is an aristocratic thing. To approach it from any side, we have to go up, never down.

I am often amused by over-zealous souls who are going to "do something for art." These people are starkly ignorant. Art is an elusive divinity. She comes and makes her abode in the most unexpected places. She leaves without

permission, and she is not subject to human will. How many cases are there of record where this muse has been handled deftly by a brain, heart and hand for many years, and then, of a sudden, the spark was gone, never to return. Art has no commerce with money, with selfishness, with politics, with position, with pull, with special favor. It cannot be bought, it cannot be courted with anything but sincerity. Are these not attributes of the true aristocrat?

I hear other well-intentioned souls admonishing us that we are withholding art from the people, that the people are hungry for art, that the only appreciation is with the common people. How can the really common people have anything in common with, anything of sympathy for, as aloof and aristocratic a thing as art? If left to the common people, and I use the word common as I have previously defined it, there would be no art. The music of Bach, of Beethoven, of Wagner, and Debussy; the work of Rembrandt, of Durer, of Whistler, and of Cezanne; the literature of Bacon, of Goethe, of Dante, and of Voltaire; these great things were not saved to us by the common people. They never were, and they never will be, of the common people. They are saved to us because a few discerning people had the perspicacity to recognize true greatness, to value the aesthetic utterances

of great minds and great spirits, and to secure them against the indifference of the people. It is because they have been labeled great so long, and because they have become a part of our books of knowledge and learning as great things, that they are accepted as such by our common people. And for no other reason. To attempt to make art understandable and appealing to the people, is to take from it the very elements that make art. Bring a thing down to the level of popular understanding, and you bring it down below the timber line of aesthetic worth.

Another amusing thing is to see well intentioned people try to slip art over harnessed with some political or moral issue. Afraid to let art stand out honestly, knowing that it possibly would be misunderstood, they sugar-coat it with some false and totally foreign element, and railroad it through. But it never works for long. I once read an interview in which the head of one of our so called Civic Bureaus said that "The boy who blows a horn will never blow a safe." This priceless epigram is the very essence of that banal and common idea of art as a moral quality. But art has nothing whatever to do with morals, or with anything else but art. Why can we not let art be what it has always been during its great periods, the glorification of form for

its own sake, and for the sentiments of lasting humanity which it arouses and develops in us, not simply a wretched handmaiden of elementary teaching and current morality. Why does art have to be connected up with battles, popular scenes, mythological pictures, historical anecdotes, tiresome love-stories. That is where confusion arises. Which is sentiment, history, allegory, etc., and which is art? And your common man is almost always confused on this subject. The mysterious harmony between sensuality, sensitiveness, and intelligence; the complex orchestration into which color, form and space enter, as it were, naturally, is all that imparts meaning to a great painting. Why try to give it some foreign implication, why must it tell a story? There is in my mind a great kinship between these three things: Spirit, Aristocracy, Elevation. There is something thrilling about these three things, and about the only things which can never be banal. The planes of an El Greco, the mountain top vistas of Rockwell Kent, the "Clouds over the Black Sea" of Boris Anisfeld (a study in elevation), these are things which have brought new zest to all things for me. The sources of aesthetic elation are surely nothing if not aristocratic. Nature, the body, the many moods which some-

times momentarily lift us, these are foreign to all that is sordid, common, mean.

And the stately, the aristocratic (if you please) march of art down through the centuries, outliving much less fragile substances, continuing, enduring, outliving races, whole civilizations, and coming to us fresh, clean, understandable and spirited, could other than an aristocrat do this?

Whistler maintains that there never has been an artistic age, nor an artistic people. I might build up a splendid case for art as the darling of the rich and the blooded and the titled nobility of all time. I might show that only in times and in countries where kings and monarchies flourished has art ever flowered with full and true magnificence, but that would be digressing, and painting another picture, and I believe, one less true. I might prove, by asserting that in my eighteen years experience in attempting to interest the public in things of some degree of aesthetic value, I have discovered that ninety-five per cent of all Americans have an aesthetic blind spot, that they were born without the possibility of aesthetic reactions. I might attempt to prove that these evidences alone tend to show that art is ever and forever the aristocrat. But I do not want to make my point except upon one basis and one premise. And that premise is

that Art is an aristocratic goddess, who can be wooed and won by anyone, so long as that anyone has a certain open-mindedness, a certain flair, a certain spirit somewhat akin to rapturous impulsiveness, a certain capability of ecstasy, a certain contempt for the cheap and the tawdry, a certain understanding of sensuality, a certain pagan love of beauty for itself alone. On that basis he can win and hold her, and she will be happy with him on either eighteen dollars a week, or fifty thousand a year.

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